

1956 OLYMPIC SWIMMING & DIVING STADIUM

World's first post-tensioned steel building hosts memorable events

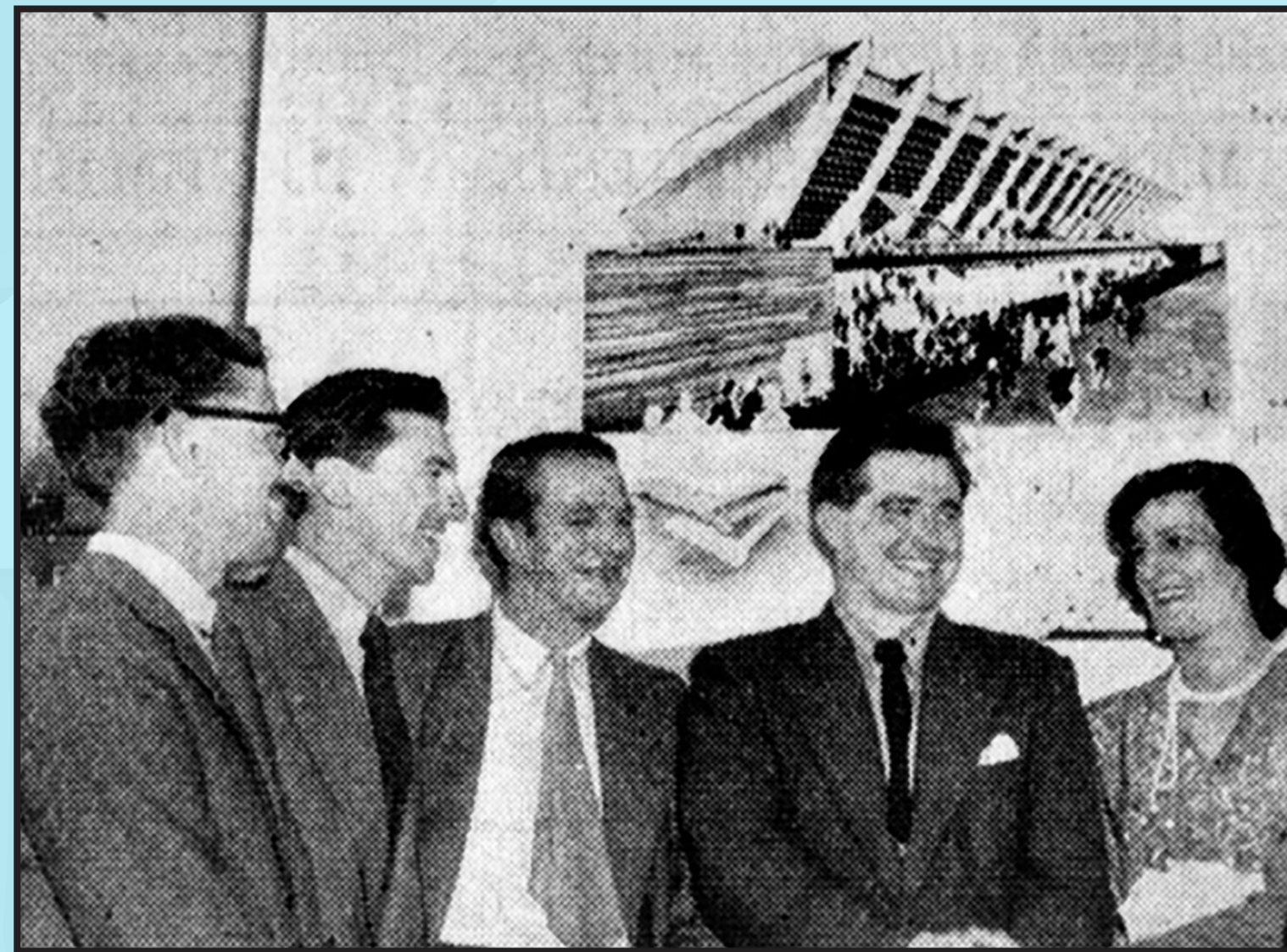
Olympic Games to Melbourne

In 1949 Melbourne won the right to stage the 16th Modern Olympic Games to be held in November 1956. They would be the first to be held in the Southern Hemisphere, the first held outside Europe and the USA, and the first televised Olympic Games.

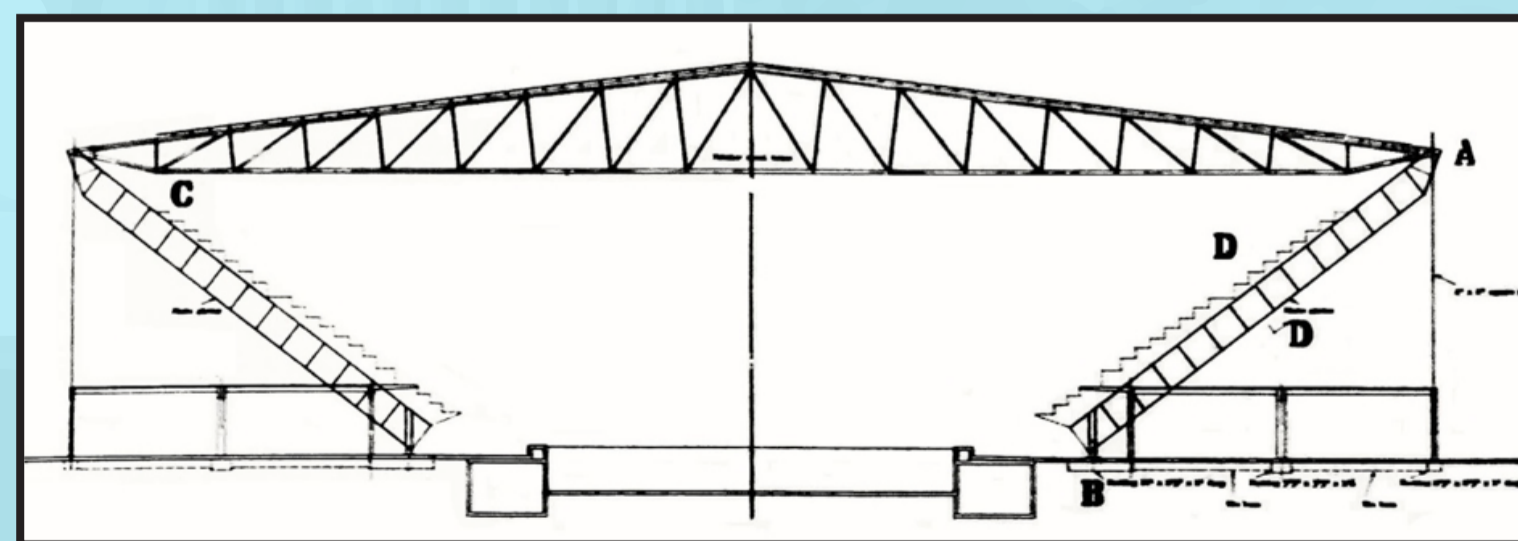
Winning Design

In 1952 the Melbourne Olympic Games Committee decided that there would be an architectural competitions for the Swimming & Diving Stadium.

Architects John Murphy, Peter McIntyre, engineer Bill Irwin, architects Kevin Borland and Phyllis Murphy, submitted the winning entry. Robin Boyd, a member of the judging panel, called the design "the best in the world".



The winners of the design competition.
See their names in the text above.
Image: The Age.



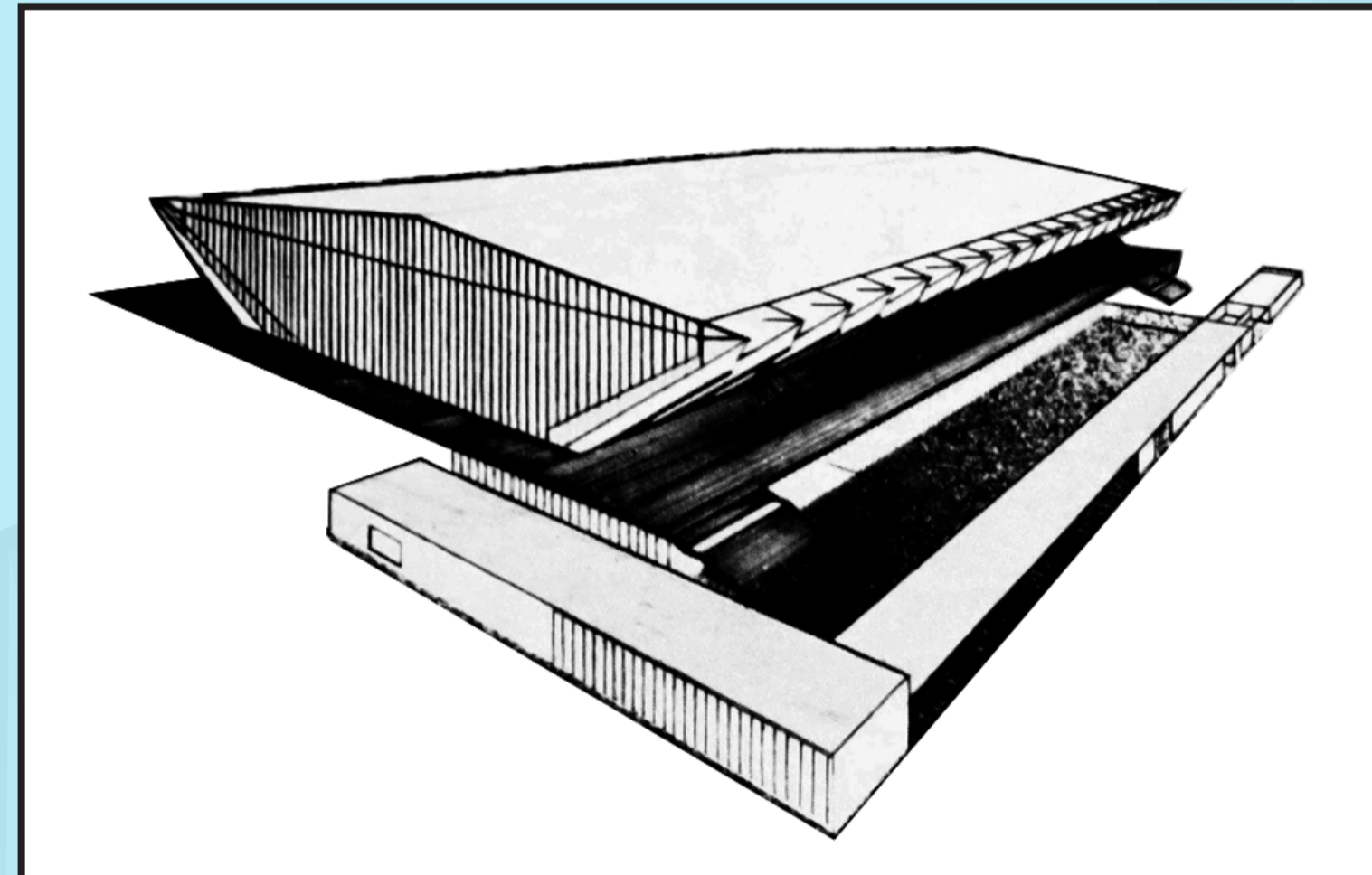
Cross section drawing of the structure from the competition document.
Image: RVIA Bulletin December 1952- January 1953, p9.

Stadium Significance

The former Olympic Swimming & Diving Stadium is of historical significance as the first enclosed swimming & diving stadium used in the Olympic Games and is the only major stadium remaining from the 1956 Olympic Games.

For the first time in Olympic history Australia became the top swimming nation.

It is of architectural significance as an early and influential landmark in the development of Structuralist architecture in Australia in the 1950s.



Perspective drawing from the competition documents.
Image: Architecture, July 1953, p79.

The Design

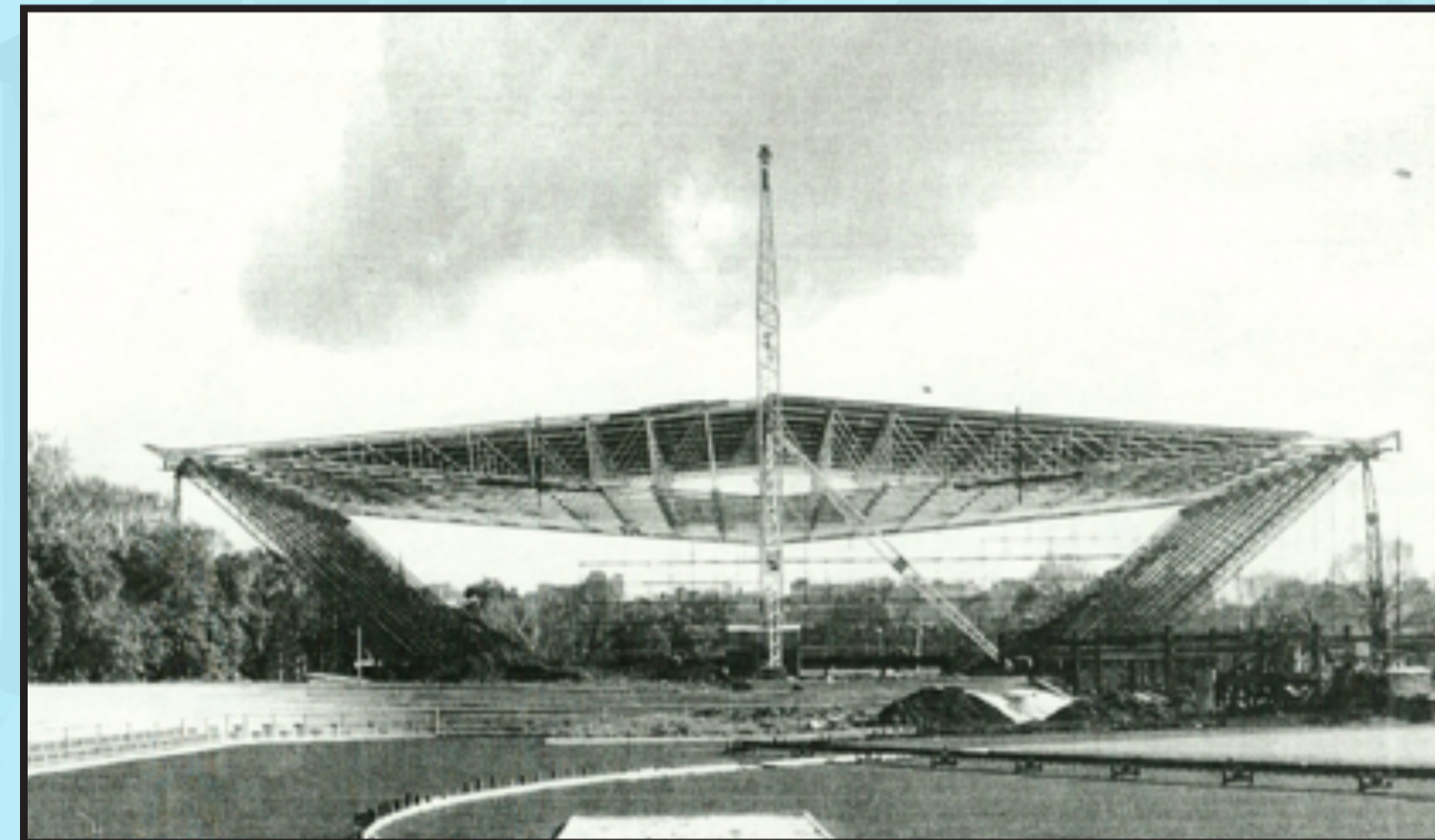
The main structure consisted of lattice girders sloping outwards at 42.5 degrees to the horizontal connected to tubular trusses at the top and pinned at their bases, with vertical tension rods connected to the top of the lattice girders. The lattice girders formed the sides of the structure and supported the seating.

The structure of the building was a superb example of 'form follows function' and was probably the world's first post-tensioned steel building as well as being a very early use of high-tensile steel for the building's structure.

Stadium Construction

After some controversy the site on Swan Street for the Swimming and Diving Stadium was decided in May 1953.

Construction started in February 1954 and was completed by 4 September 1956. The Olympic Games opened on 22 November 1956 with the first event in the pool on 27 November.



The frame of the structure during construction.
Image: Commercial Photographic Co, SLV Collection.



Interior of the building showing the pool structure during construction.
Image: Museum Victoria.

Swimming Events

In the swimming events Australia won all of the freestyle races for both men and women, collecting eight individual gold, four silver and two bronze medals, making Australia the top swimming nation at the Games. Jon Hendricks and Dawn Fraser set new world records in their events and Murray Rose became the first male swimmer to win two freestyle events since Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan) in 1924.

The most dramatic event that took place was the 'Blood in the Water' incident during the water polo semi-final match between Hungary and the Soviet Union. On 4 November the Soviet Union had invaded Hungary to put down the revolt against the Communist Hungarian government and by 10 November the revolt was brutally crushed.

The tension arising from this event lead to the water polo match between the two national teams becoming a bloodbath with players attacking each other until the referees halted the match. Hungary was declared the winner and went on to win the gold medal.



Blood in the Water. Hungarian athlete being escorted from the pool after the water polo match between Hungary and the Soviet Union.
Image: PROV, VPRS 10742/PO, Unit 18, Item C2457.

These 1956 Olympic events, many staged in this dramatic pool setting, caused international controversy. They left strong memories with the many global visitors and pioneered their instant impact across a world-wide audience by the new magic of television.

Background Image: See,jay



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